

Christ is risen. Alleluia! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!!

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2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some time ago, a man brought his family from the state of New York, USA, to Australia to take advantage of a work opportunity here. Part of this man's family was a handsome young son who had aspirations of joining the circus as a trapeze artist or becoming an actor. This young man, biding his time until a circus job or even one as a stagehand came along, worked at the local shipyards, which bordered on the worse part of town.

Walking home from work one evening the young man was attacked by five thugs who wanted to rob him. Instead of just giving up his money, the young fellow resisted. The thugs got the better of him easily and proceeded to beat his body brutally with clubs, leaving him for dead. When the police happened to find him lying in the road, he was so badly beaten that they assumed he was dead. Soon after though a police officer heard him gasp for air, and so they immediately took him to the emergency unit at the hospital.

When he was placed on a gurney, a nurse remarked, to her horror, that this young man no longer had a face. Each eye socket was smashed, his skull, legs, and arms fractured, his nose literally hanging from his face, all his teeth were gone, and his jaw was almost completely torn from his skull. Although his life was spared, he spent over a year in the hospital. When he finally left, his body may have healed but his face was disgusting to look at. He was no longer the handsome youth that everyone admired.

When the young man started to look for work, everyone, just because of the way he looked, turned him down. One potential employer suggested to him that he join the freak show at the circus as "The Man Who Had No Face." He did this for a while. He was still rejected by everyone and no one wanted to be seen in his company. He had thoughts of suicide.

This went on for five years.

One day he passed a church and sought some solace there. Inside the church, he encountered a priest who had seen him sobbing while kneeling in a pew. The priest took pity on him and took him to the rectory where they talked at length. The priest was impressed with him to such a degree that he said that he would do everything possible for him that could be done to restore his dignity and life if the young man would promise to be the best Catholic he could be and trust in God's mercy to free him from his torturous life. The young man went to Mass and communion everyday and after thanking God for saving his life, asked only that God give him peace of mind and the grace to be the best man he could ever be in His eyes.

The priest, through his personal contacts, was able to secure the services of the best plastic surgeon in Australia. There would be no cost to the young man because the doctor was the priest's best friend. The doctor too was so impressed by the young man, whose outlook now on life, even though he had experienced the worst, was filled with good humour and love. The surgery was a miraculous success. All the best dental work was also done for him. And the young man became everything he promised God he would be. He was also blessed with a wonderful wife, children, and success in an industry which would have been the farthest thing from his mind as a career – if not for the goodness of God and the love of the people who cared for him. This he acknowledges publicly.

The young man was Mel Gibson. His life was the inspiration for his production of the movie "The Man Without A Face." He is

admired as a God-fearing man, a political and religious conservative, and an example to all of a true man of courage. "The Passion of the Christ" is in part Mel's way of thanking God for his many blessings.

Do you believe this story? For myself, I am not sure. I received the story from what is probably a reliable source but part of me says that unless I see and hear it from somewhere indisputable, I won't believe. How could all that be true?!? We have a healthy scepticism when faced with something like this. Parts of the story sound all too plausible, especially the way some people were quick to put another person down or shun them rather than accept someone so damaged. But ... part of us asks "what is going on here?" and withholds our belief. We think "I am just not ready to believe that, ... yet, without more information."

Today we read the story of Thomas (John 20:19-31). He gets a fairly bad rap in the overall scheme of things. 'Doubting Thomas' is the label with which he has been stuck. The criticism for his failure to accept the story straight away is easily on our lips. Yet I wonder how any of us would have fared in the same situation. When something seems incredible to us, we may all respond with doubt, at least initially. Actually, I think we have a lot to thank Thomas for. What he presented was healthy scepticism. He recognised that there were gaps in the story. He wanted to be sure before he could trust himself and his reactions to a story that clearly made a huge difference to his life.

Certainly, John the writer of today's Gospel knew that. Writing near the end of the first century, he was addressing people who had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh. The stories they heard were second or even third hand. John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen and touched. The story of Thomas gave him an excellent way to do that. By focusing on the apostle's doubt,

John takes the words out of our mouths and puts them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do, or do not come to believe.

In John Irvings novel, A Prayer for Owen Meany, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a gray granite statue of Mary Magdalene as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows. Owen keeps pushing:

You have no doubt she's there, Owen nagged at me.

"Of course, I have no doubt'' I said.

"But you can't see her'' you could be wrong, he said.

"No, I'm not wrong she is there, I know she's there!" I yelled at him.

"You absolutely know she's there "even though you can't see her?" He asked me.

"Yes" I screamed.

"Well, now you know how I feel about God", said Owen Meany. "I can't see him, but I absolutely know he is there!". The character Owen Meany is a great example of the kind of faith that St. John celebrates in chapter 20 of his Gospel. Because Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction. He does not need to see signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around this belief.

We have choices, always. We can let the gaps in our knowledge bog us down, or we can grasp the truth we can see and step forward with confidence, always being open to search further, to learn more, to be corrected and guided along the way as we

search for clearer answers. With this confidence we can say, with Thomas, and with Mel Gibson, and with all who have learned to trust: Christ is risen. Alleluia: He is risen indeed. Alleluia'!